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EXPERTS RECOMMEND REVISED WELFARE LAWS AND SUPPORTS
Panel Convened In Anticipation Of New Federal Requirements In 2005

A broad-based expert panel has expressed strong support for efforts to engage more Massachusetts welfare recipients in activities that will enhance their quest for financial independence. The report also supports retaining a key component of welfare reform in Massachusetts in recommending that job training and education leading to a job will continue to count towards the work requirement.

Welfare reform is expected to be at the forefront again this year as the 10-year waiver Massachusetts received from the federal government in 1995 to operate its state program expires in September. Massachusetts is currently one of only two states in the country operating under a welfare waiver, exempting the state from more stringent federal requirements. In addition to the impending expiration of this waiver, Congress is also expected to resume the welfare debate and require states to do even more than they are today.

“Massachusetts should not retreat from the bedrock principles of the state’s welfare reform program – the work requirement and the two-year time limit,” said the report from the Welfare Reform Advisory Committee, co-chaired by United Way of Massachusetts Bay Vice President Jeffery Hayward and Department of Transitional Assistance Assistant Commissioner Edward Sanders-Bey.

The report also recognizes the value of employment-related education, “Education provides protection against recession, and better equips graduates for jobs in the new economy.”

“We must change expectations and think of employment for people with disabilities as the rule, not the exception,” said Advisory Committee member William Kiernan from the Institute for Community Inclusion. “To improve worker preparation, we need to link training resources with industry needs. For example, community college and One-Stop Career Center training programs can play a strong role in preparing people with disabilities for high growth industries.”

Not only does the report seek to engage more welfare recipients in work activities, but it also calls for meaningful assessments of welfare recipients and individual development plans charting a path for success after welfare.

“The committee thought that medical evaluations should now be focused not on exempting persons from full engagement, but instead on determining what the individual person with disabilities was capable of doing, with sufficient support, to contribute to their success and that of their children,” the report notes.

Nearly three-quarters of the state’s 49,000 welfare families are currently exempt from a work requirement. The recommendations from the advisory committee would require approximately 22,000 recipients to work.

Other recommendations include:

- 34 hours of work or related activities for non-exempt recipients, compared to the current 20, 24 and 30 hours, depending upon the age of the family’s youngest child.
- Expansion of activities that constitute work.
- Providing more incentives for welfare recipients to work by allowing them to keep more of their income when they go to work.
- Adequate funding for assessments, as well as education and training programs.
- Offering different program activities that promote employability and self-sufficiency for various populations, including hard-to-serve recipients.
- Continued exemptions for parents whose youngest child is under 2 years of age.
- Involving local employers in the process of job preparation and placement.
- Continuation of co-location of DTA offices and support services.
- A review of the education/training provider reimbursement structure to introduce incentives for job retention and advancement in addition to job placement.

“I applaud DTA’s willingness to hear from those greatly interested and greatly impacted by pending changes to federal law,” said Hayward. “Hopefully the fact that the Committee saw the value in retaining as many opportunities as possible for recipients as they seek self-sufficiency will guide future policy discussions and direction.”

“This report will serve as a valuable blueprint for legislators and policy makers trying to mold state welfare requirements that will need to conform with federal law once the Massachusetts welfare waiver expires,” said DTA Commissioner John Wagner.

When Massachusetts welfare reform was signed into law in February 1995, there were approximately 103,000 families receiving \$693 million per year in cash assistance. Today’s 49,000 families receive about \$313 million per year, while another \$54 million has been funneled into child care for them.

In addition to the United Way and DTA, other committee members were from:

- YMCA Training, Inc.
- Institute for Community Inclusion
- Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Association

- Department of Public Health
- The TJX Companies
- New England Farm Workers
- Mass. Law Reform Institute
- UMass Medical School Disability Evaluation Services
- Office of Child Care Services
- Department of Education
- Workforce Investment Administrators Association
- Massachusetts Executive Office of Community Colleges

The report can be viewed in its entirety at www.mass.gov/dta or www.uwmb.org.

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